CONSERVATION Showcase

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

Living Snow Fence Grows Up

Iowa spring storms can be fickle. But even if a late spring snowstorm hits northern Iowa this year, John Laflen will be happy. It isn't that he likes bad weather; it's just that blowing snow gives him the opportunity to test his maturing living snow fence. Protecting nearly a quarter mile of Highway 9 and a half-mile of 50th Ave. in Winnebago County, the trees, shrubs and native grasses planted in 2005 tame snow drifts and keep the roads open during winter storms.

Retired agricultural engineer John Laflen points to his three-year-old living snow fence. The plantings of native grasses, trees and shrubs trap blowing and drifting snow on his Winnebago County property to keep the county road to the east from drifting shut and blocking his neighbors until snow plows arrive.

That's an especially important benefit to Laflen's neighbors that travel 50th Ave. The road is gravel north of Highway 9 and it does not have as high a priority for snow clearing as the concrete state or federal highway.

Craig Aukes, a neighbor who lives on 50th Avenue across from Laflen's snow fence, said, "I can't say enough about what John has done. He's put in a lot of work into his living snow fence and it's done an excellent job of keeping the road clear. It stops a lot of snow. In past winters the road would drift shut for a day or two waiting for the county to plow it. This year it didn't happen once."

The benefit Laflen's neighbors enjoy started to take shape three years ago when the local office of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) contacted him about a new living snow fence component of continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Laflen looked at the program, examined its benefits to the environment, considered the financial assistance package for construction and annual rental payments, and asked to sign on. NRCS designed the living snow fence, Laflen approved the design and construction began.

Laflen's 140 foot wide living snow fence borders an 80-acre farm field on two sides. A row of shrubs and a row of trees surrounded by native grasses, about 10 acres, are enrolled into CRP.

"It normally takes three years for vegetation in living snow fences to really grow enough to start offering good snow stopping benefits," said Lynn Kluver, NRCS soil conser-

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vation technician. “The Laflen living snow fence is growing very well and the neighbors and the environment are clearly benefiting.”

Aukes says the living snow fence improved the quality of their lives and also greatly increased the number of pheasants in the area. He says he is very pleased the living snow fence was built and grateful his neighbor built it.

Laflen is a retired agricultural engineer who spent 39 years with USDA’s Agricultural Research Service working with NRCS on systems, tools and techniques that combat soil erosion. “I like the living snow fence. Besides keeping snow off the roadways,” said Laflen, “the living snow fence stops and stores snow so that it melts more slowly in the spring. Snow that melts more slowly has more time to infiltrate, filter and recharge the water table. That reduces flooding for those downstream. It’s to everyone’s advantage to slow the water down by using tools like a living snow fence.”

Iowa Department of Transportation Winter Operations Administrator Dennis Burkheimer said, “We’d sure like to see more living snow fences in Iowa. They not only cut the amount of plowing needed to keep roads free of blowing and drifting snow, but they also improve visibility for the traveling public. Increased visibility means more safety for the traveling public.”

For more information about living snow fences, contact NRCS in your local USDA Service Center.

By Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist
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NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Lynn Kluver and landowner John Laflen stand on Laflen’s three-year-old living snow fence near highway 9 in Winnebago County. A component of continuous CRP, the vegetative barrier traps and controls blowing snow which helps keep the roadway on the right from drifting shut.